

**A
FRIENDLY
GUIDE TO**

THE BOOK OF PSALMS



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this book.

DEDICATION

*This book is dedicated to
the scholarship and memory of
Angelo O’Hagan OFM (1929–2016).
My teacher.*

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*Cover: Tree of Life, artist unknown
Title page: Alleluia by Thomas Cooper Gotch circa 1896*

INTRODUCTION

Pope Francis has called the Church to a deeper immersion into the Scriptures. He has named the third Sunday of the year as a 'Sunday of the Word of God'. In Australia, the Catholic bishops have chosen to mark this on the first Sunday of February so as not to conflict with Australia Day. The Pope announced this on September 30th 2019, the feast of St Jerome, the patron saint of Scripture lovers.

The Scriptures will nourish us and sometimes challenge us if we spend time with them. They can be life-changing. In Luke 2:19 Mary contemplates the events she has experienced and I like to imagine her allowing the stories of her people, the Word of God, to shape how she came to understand her own experience. This process of meaning-making requires reflection on life and a familiarity with the Word of God in the Bible. Jesus, as an observant

Jew, would have prayed the psalms personally and with his people, especially when celebrating the feasts in the Temple. The Evangelists witness to this in placing texts from the psalms on his lips as he dies. The Book of Psalms is the most frequently cited Old Testament book in the New Testament.

The psalms have a special place in both Jewish and Christian tradition and today, as in past centuries, they invite us into a life-long dialogue with God. The psalms are the most intimate communication of the individual and community with the Beloved. They help us speak truthfully about our experiences and feelings; they also invite us to be willing to wait for God's response. In that they are our words to God they can be raw and honest. In that they are God's word spoken to us they humble and exalt us as we listen attentively. In this they differ from

most of the rest of the Bible. They are profound, enigmatic, enticing, sometimes repulsive and always so very honest.

Psalms are familiar and yet strange. I have been teaching the psalms for more than thirty years and yet they still surprise me and call me to listen more carefully to the revelation within them. Metaphors abound and are both familiar and unfamiliar. The tree and chaff of Psalm 1 are familiar but the bottle full of tears of Psalm 56 is far less so. We all know Psalm 23, *The Lord is my Shepherd*; yet we sometimes miss the other striking image in this Psalm, the banquet, the table the Lord prepares before me.

A Friendly Guide to the Book of Psalms aims to slow the reader down, so as to go deeply into the text and to be amazed at what is there. Often, psalms speak of encountering enemies and of vengeance and we might tend to shy away from them; but such

Numbering of the Psalms

You will notice that sometimes the same psalm is numbered differently in different contexts. This is because the system of numbering the psalms in the Greek tradition and the Hebrew tradition is slightly different. The Latin follows the Greek

numbering and Catholics have followed the Latin. The Christian Orthodox communities follow the Greek numbering. The Reform communities follow the Hebrew numbering. In this *Friendly Guide* the Hebrew numbering is followed.

Psalms 1–9: same numbering in all traditions.
(Greek Pss 9 & 10 are one psalm)

Psalms 10–113: one difference in numbering. (Greek is one behind the Hebrew.)

Psalms 113–115 – Ps 113 Greek = Pss 114-115 in Hebrew
(Hebrew Ps 116 = Greek Pss 114 & 115)

Psalm 116 – 147 one difference in numbering.
(Hebrew Ps 147 = Greek Pss 146 & 147)

Psalms 148 – 150 same numbering in all traditions.

The text is the same but the way it is divided is different.

הַלְלֵי יְהוָה
(hah-leh-loo-yah)
praise Yah
(hallelujah)

Halleluyah

This is a joy-filled command translated as 'Praise the LORD'. It is derived from two Hebrew words: הַלְלֵי (*hallelu*, masculine imperative meaning 'praise') and יְהוָה, (*Yah* or *Jah*, an abbreviation of the special name of God YHWH). It is an exhortation to all to praise God. The NRSV does

not use Alleluia or Halleluia or Halleluyah, instead translating the word as 'Praise the LORD'. It is to be found in psalms: 104-106; 111-113; 115-117; 135; 146-150. It usually occurs at the beginning or end of the psalm. You will notice that all occurrences are in the final third of the Psalter, moving towards a crescendo of praise.

psalms invite us to plumb the depths of our own hearts with honesty and allow God to touch the pain and anger. The psalms also invite us to turn towards God in the experience of wonder, of gratitude, of a heightened sense of being the recipient of goodness. Particularly at times of deep emotion, the psalms offer us words with which to speak our truth to the Beloved.

Many encounter the psalms as the response in the Liturgy of the Word. Sadly, the psalm is seldom mentioned in homilies. Some pray the Prayer of the Church, (Divine Office, Liturgy of the Hours) which abounds with psalms. Priests are required to pray this daily and fortunately many others are now engaging this ancient practice of praying the Liturgy of the Hours so as to mark the turning points of the day with prayer.

The *Friendly Guide* offers a way to explore the ocean of emotions, metaphors, poetic succinctness and surprises behind the power of God's Word in the Book of Psalms. The psalms are like an ancient city that we explore and then excavate in order to understand their depth and story more fully. In order to excavate the psalms, you will need a bible beside you (preferably the NRSV translation): the text will reveal its secrets only when you attend to it with care.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to comment on all of the 150 psalms, so some representative texts will be explored. However, with these examples, the background information will help the reader reach a deeper understanding of their meaning, evoking an engagement with the text and a dialogue with their theology.

The term 'Word of God' refers to the Bible. It also refers to Jesus who is the Word made flesh. In this book, it is used as a way of speaking of the Scriptures.



AN INVITATION INTO THE BOOK OF PSALMS

Book of Psalms: the Psalter

Both terms refer to the collection of 150 psalms in the Bible. There are other psalms in the Bible which are not included in this collection: these are often called *canticles*. The most famous of the canticles is the *Magnificat*, the song placed on the lips of Mary by the evangelist Luke. In 1 Samuel 2 we find the prayer of Hannah, which seems to have influenced the *Magnificat*; it too is a psalm, even though not found in the Psalter. In the Book of Daniel we find the Canticle of the Three Young Men. The Book of Isaiah contains hymns and laments, which are characteristic of psalms. The word *psalm* is from the Greek translation and refers to songs accompanied by stringed instruments. The word used to name this book in Jewish tradition is *Tehillim*, praises. This word comes from the same root as *Halleluyah*. Thus, the Jewish tradition characterises this book as praise, even though there are more laments than songs of praise.

The Book of Psalms is one of the longest books in the Bible and it contains a variety of prayers, reflections and invitations. These are all in poetic form and are filled with images and sayings that inspire us and allow us to touch a range of emotions.

These ancient texts are remarkably current and tantalising. They ask questions about the meaning of life: *What are human beings that you keep them in mind?* (Ps 8:4); *Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.* (Ps 139:4); *How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?* (Ps 13:1)

The psalms sometimes ask the questions we cannot articulate or even dare to utter. Many of them are addressed to God and are therefore prayers. These prayers give us words when words may fail us; the psalms give us words to express our deepest emotions and concerns. Because psalms are also Scripture, they are, in a very real sense, God's Word. Thus, psalms are both our words to God and God's gift, God's Word, to us. They are a dialogue in themselves and they invite us into dialogue with God and with self and with community.

King David has long been associated with the psalms: he is known in the tradition as a musician and composer. We even read of him soothing King Saul with his playing (1 Sam 16:23). Many of the psalms have a heading that links a specific psalm to David, and some even specify an event in David's life to which the particular psalm refers. Yet most scholars today acknowledge that



Right: David composing the psalms with Melodia behind him, from the Paris Psalter, Byzantine, 10th century

David is not the composer of the majority of them. However, his name continues to evoke links with the psalms. His name provides authority.

Many psalms were chanted in Temple liturgy, and we see this communal context over and over. Most of the psalms were written to be chanted, sung to a simple melody. The Israelites knew, as we do today, that a chant stays with us longer in our hearts and minds than does a simple recitation. Even though the very religious context of the Temple was a springboard for the initial writing of psalms, they also reflect the experiences and emotions of daily life in biblical times.

PSALM 1

Daily life is at the heart of the psalmist's concerns from the start. Psalm 1 invites us into the Book of Psalms. It is both an invitation into the book and an invitation into life. First, it describes a happy person. *Happy is the one who ...* If I may use the Hebrew somewhat literally it says: *happy is the one who does not WALK with the counsel of the wicked or STAND with sinners or SIT with scoffers.* The only remaining thing is to lie down, asleep. In other words, the whole life of the happy person is not to be caught up with the journey of those who promote wickedness. The ways of God are represented by *Torah*, God's teaching. This teaching is the delight of the happy person who meditates on it day and night. Many who have prayed this psalm ask: but

how can I meditate on God's teaching day and night; I need to work and to spend time with my family?

The answer is to be found in our living: our WALKING, STANDING and SITTING. When we go about the ordinariness of life we are invited to ponder God's ways. It is not all about studying the text, but living the text, seeing God and God's ways amidst the totality of life *because* we have studied the text. We meditate on God's Torah in both the text and in life around us. The psalm then places before the reader two metaphors, a choice: do you want to be a fruitful tree or chaff blown by the wind? Those who delight in God's teaching are like a tree. Those who choose the other way are like chaff. We the readers must make the choice: do I wish to be a flourishing tree or dead chaff? The other, lesser, metaphor in this psalm is 'way' or 'path'. This too is associated with the choice the reader is invited to make: what path will I choose?

To sum it up, Psalm 1 invites the reader into the whole array of the book. It invites the reader to be a happy person, to make choices, to delight in God's teachings and to see oneself as a tree planted near a running stream. However, it does this through contrasting metaphors and the choice as to the path or direction for life. It is somewhat confronting in its dualism, the either/or nature of the choice: there is no grey here, only black or white. It therefore suggests that the remainder of the Psalter will continue to teach us about our choices and God's ways. There may be

grey areas in life, but the Psalter deals more with the emotional highs and lows, helping us discern the meaning of our experience by placing before us the extremes.

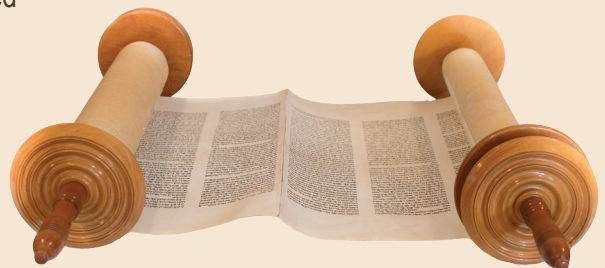
Psalm 1 sets us on a path to explore the Psalter through paying attention to its details, message, poetry and starkness.

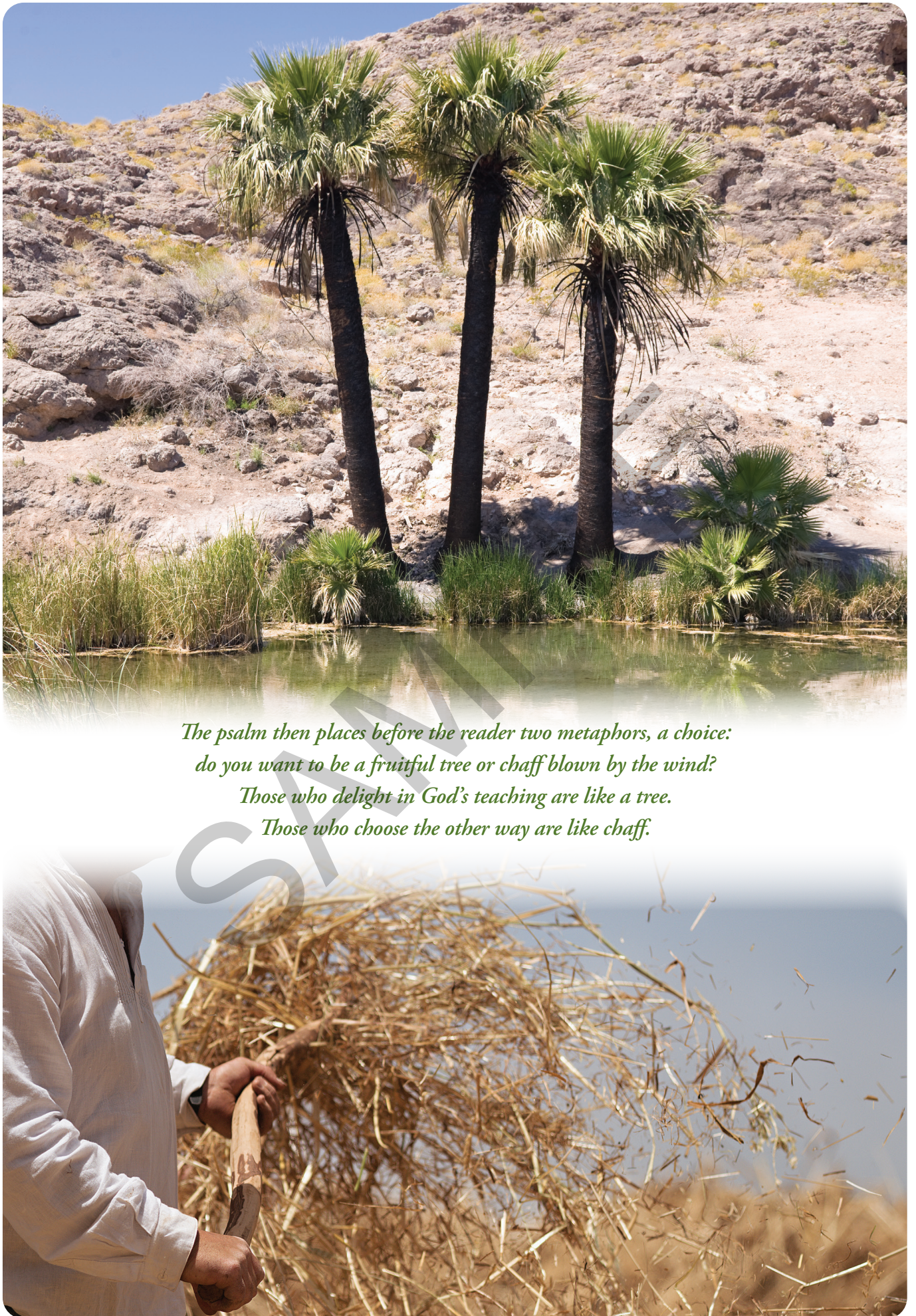
Like the Torah, the Psalter is divided into five books. The Torah (or Pentateuch) has a special place in Judaism and the psalms reflect this by their five-fold division, indicating that the Psalter has a similar authority and importance for the life of the people of Israel. This will be explored later.

We have seen how Psalm 1 invites us into the whole Book of Psalms; it is a Torah psalm. Torah psalms are focused on God's teachings, God's *Torah*. They praise these teachings and commandments and notice the great wisdom in them. The longest psalm in the Psalter, Psalm 119, is also a Torah psalm; it is 176 verses long and in earlier times many Christian scholars called it boring. It is an acrostic psalm: based on the Hebrew alphabet, it is an outpouring of appreciation and love for the *Torah* and for the God who teaches and instructs the psalmist how to live according to God's ways. It says everything from A to Z – or in the Hebrew alphabet, everything from *aleph* to *tav*.

God's teachings, elaborated in Psalm 119, are the path to happiness for this psalmist, as suggested in Psalm 1 and celebrated in Psalm 19 (the third of the *Torah* psalms).

Did you know that the Hebrew word *Torah* is usually translated as 'law', but this is a limited interpretation that does not reflect *Torah's* range of meaning? *Torah* can refer to the first five books of the Bible and also to all of God's teachings. Both these interpretations include laws as well as the kind of teachings offered by God through story, invitations and direct speech. In this work I will not translate *Torah* but retain the Hebrew transliteration.





*The psalm then places before the reader two metaphors, a choice:
do you want to be a fruitful tree or chaff blown by the wind?
Those who delight in God's teaching are like a tree.
Those who choose the other way are like chaff.*